Using Picture Books to Enhance Meaningful, Inclusive, and Socially Just Relationships

Carolyn Clarke, Evan Throop Robinson, Ellen Carter, and Jo Anne Broders

Abstract

This article explores spaces for transformation for teachers and learners using picture books, encouraging them to share their stories and have their voices heard through multiple forms of representation. We describe one teacher's journey with her secondary school students. Classroom data show how reading and creating picture books provoke holistic and comprehensive discussions about topics of societal and personal importance such as equity and inclusion. Benefits for students to create and share their stories include (a) participating in meaningful, inclusive, and socially just discussions that promote interconnectedness and diversity; and (b) becoming positive role models through interactions and relationships with younger students.

Introduction

As part of a secondary school classroom project, 13-year-old Jane (names of students are pseudonyms) wrote and illustrated an original picture book about finding peace in nature to help cope with the stresses of everyday life. Jane chose this topic because for her, when she is having a difficult day, she actively embraces well-being by connecting with nature. In her picture book, *The Enchanted Forest*, she writes, "In the forest you see all the trees, along with a low and calming breeze… the Enchanted Forest is full of power." She concludes her picture book with: "In the Enchanted Forest I get to be me. My favorite place to be. Where is your favorite place to be?" (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Where all the animals feel they belong

Jane's book sparked an engaging classroom discussion about what teenagers do when they feel stressed and where they find their happy place (Spector et al., 2024). When reflecting on the experience of the creative process, Jane said, "I would definitely recommend it [writing and illustrating a picture book] to other grades. You get to do art and writing together. I personally really enjoyed it." Creating a space within the classroom for learners to discuss important topics and safe places beyond the walls of the school encourages a transformative connection between the classroom and the world students experience outside.

Jane, a student in Jo Anne's secondary classroom, highlights for us the value of creativity and the importance of understanding differences in how all individuals deal with challenges in their lives. Rich experiences, reflection, and discussion help teenagers develop empathy to become compassionate, interconnected citizens who build relational understandings between themselves and the world around them. Jane's response to reading and writing picture books as part of the secondary school curriculum reveals the positive impact of using picture books with all learners.

The combination of one teacher of secondary school English and social studies and three university teacher educators brought diversity to this study. Jo Anne teaches grades 8–12 at a Kindergarten to Grade 12 school located in a rural area on the island portion of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. The three teacher educators all teach in the same teacher education program in a small rural university on Canada's east coast. In this article, we describe Jo Anne's process of creating picture books, using multiple forms of representation, with secondary students. This process also emphasized how artistic practices within secondary classrooms can be transformative for learners when art is valued.

In our classrooms, we seek positive actions with teenagers and adults to address issues of inclusion, race, culture, gender, and identity by choosing picture books that speak to such diversity. (See "List of Picture Books for Secondary Students" at the end of this article.) For example, in our work with students, Carolyn reads *Up Home* (Grant, 2023), a book written by an African Nova Scotian about growing up in a rural town in Nova Scotia. The illustrations capture the warmth and beauty of one of Canada's most important Black communities. This beautiful book allows individuals who are often marginalized and not visible in stories to see themselves in picture books. Carolyn also reads *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 2003) and *Room on Our Rock* (Temple & Temple, 2021) to discuss implicit bias. Evan reads *The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity: A Tale of the Genius Ramanujan* (Alznauer, 2020) and *Maryam's Magic: The Story of Mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani* (Reid, 2021) to introduce non-Eurocentric mathematicians, and Ellen reads *We Move Together* (Fritsch & MacGuire, 2021) to illustrate disability and accessibility across students. One picture book Ellen reads with her secondary students is *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2009) because it stresses the importance of accepting gender diversity.

As current trends in public discussions, social media, and online sites show an increase in the banning of books and certain topics in schools, we believe it is critical that educators promote picture books that address these issues at a young and formative age. Even public libraries face scrutiny of their holdings, and appeals to remove picture books dealing with human sexuality—particularly those showing

representation of LGBTQIA2S+ communities (Logan, 2023)—are becoming increasingly common. This movement makes it difficult for teachers to use their professional judgment and choose books they deem to be the best teaching resources. As Routman (2023) explained, "Such a move denigrates our faith in children, teachers, and our public schools" (p. 62). Appleman (2022) had a similar view, claiming that "perhaps, most importantly, we need to trust our students to be able to learn to read words and worlds through a critical eye" (p. 140) and cautioning against reactionary attempts "to paint a broad brush and eliminate any material that is possibly offensive in any way to anyone" (p. 78). Appleman continues by challenging those in power to disrupt and reread texts rather than simply ban them. Given these current trends, opening socially just spaces where all voices are valued becomes more important than ever for young learners to feel safe and connected.

When referring to picture books, we are talking about illustrated children's literature written for young children. We use the term *picture book* intentionally, as *children's literature* often infers books that are written for children alone. We believe that picture books have a broader appeal with deep messages and are effective learning tools for all levels of education. While picture books are often stereotyped as appropriate for younger age groups and underused in higher grades (Clarke & Broders, 2022), our classroom experiences with secondary students through the creation and sharing of picture books indicate that they improve student engagement in literacy and help grow students' understandings of many societal issues. By referring to the books we use as *picture books*, we hope to appeal to a wider audience, specifically secondary school educators, who will recognize the benefits of using picture books as pedagogy.

In this article we share the experiences of using and creating picture books with secondary school students. For teenagers, it is necessary to have easy access to books that allow them to interact with the relationship they have with themselves and others (Mesa Morales & Zapata, 2024). Carefully selected picture books inspire students to think about how they might envision a more equitable world by reading, writing, and expressing themselves creatively. Within socially just, safe spaces, we show how picture books generate meaningful conversations about societal issues of importance to students in their lives.

Setting the Context

Participants

As previously referenced, our project involved a team of researchers at a university and a secondary school in Atlantic Canada. Prior to commencing, the team received approval from the university research ethics board and the public school board to use and share students' original words and images. Informed consent was also obtained from all participants. We acknowledge that researcher subjectivity plays a role in this study, as Jo Anne was on the inside conducting research in her own classroom. It is impossible not to bring personal perspectives, biases, and experiences to the research process. However, through researchers' reflexivity and their ability to critically examine their own influence on the research, they are accountable to the integrity of the research process. Also, as a group of researchers in the data collection and analysis process, we provide diversity in perspectives which helps reduce individual bias.

The researchers investigated their classroom libraries to determine representation of diverse individuals and ethnicities (Tate et al., 2022). Subsequently, through self-study and critical friendship (Schuck & Russell, 2005), we each examined our pedagogical practices (teaching methods, learning activities, instructional strategies, etc.) in using and creating picture books with secondary students. This included Jo Anne's use of picture books as pedagogy for her English Language Arts class of 20 secondary students. It is a rural school where most of the students are from similar cultural backgrounds. The majority of students are of European ancestry, with a few of Indigenous heritage.

Background

This research project involved Jo Anne creating picture books with secondary students, providing an opportunity to tap into their interests, think about what was important to them, and elaborate on those topics. To begin, students initialized and activated their thoughts on writing a picture book; they reflected on picture books that were familiar to them and books that may have been favorites. As those conversations unfolded, students shared many of the picture books they liked through listening to classroom read alouds, sharing physical books, or reading independently. In re-familiarizing themselves with picture books, students collected and shared a library of approximately 40 picture books. This crucial exposure increased their understanding of what a picture book is and sparked their creativity with thoughts of characters, plot, and what their illustrated picture book might look like. Students then created their own original picture books, which became our primary data source.

When introducing picture books in the classroom, Jo Anne invited students to read books from their home collections, the classroom library, the school library, as well as books online. After exploring picture books alongside Jo Anne, students began to plan for writing and illustrating their own picture books. They used available class time (five 60-minute classes per week) to discuss potential topics before beginning to write and illustrate their own books. Many students wanted to be told what to write about and were reluctant to choose their own topics. Jo Anne chatted with students but did not give them a topic because she recognized the importance of providing students with choice in their work. She encouraged students to discover independently what they would like to write about and illustrate, making their work more personally meaningful and often more enjoyable. The students explored and brainstormed what they thought would be of interest to their intended audiences. As previously stated, students aligned their cultural values and expressed themselves both through visuals and writing (Jones et al., 2022). Students knew from the onset that their audience would be their classmates and elementary students (Kindergarten to Grade 6). We believed that would be where secondary students would initially feel more comfortable in sharing their self-created books. Consequently, the chosen topics for the secondary students' picture books included acceptance, cultural identities, equity, respect, an understanding of the different aspects of bullying, safe spaces and places, and the stereotyping of appearances. These topics provided opportunities for students to engage in socially just conversations as they composed their own books.

Spencer and Pierce (2023) suggest personal stories provide a means "to express emotions and report adverse experiences" (p. 528). Through discussion in Jo Anne's classroom, students determined two specific areas they felt were important to broaden the appeal of their writing: (i) conflict and (ii) characterization. They recognized that conflict creates interest and builds dramatic tension in stories. Examples of conflict that students chose to resolve included learning to love who you are, finding a place that brings you happiness while dealing with stress, and realizing that there are consequences to actions.

We continue to elaborate on this classroom context as we present our findings below.

Data Sources and Analysis

Together with the students' picture books, we used Jo Anne's reflective notes on the pedagogical practice of using picture books with secondary students, student reflections on the writing process, and interview transcripts for analysis. First, Jo Anne shared student-created picture books in our self-study and provided the students' reflections. Jo Anne then shared transcripts of the conversations. Each researcher read the data transcripts independently to identify themes such as social issues, identity, equity, and inclusion, as well as multiple forms of representation. Through Jo Anne's observations and student self-reflection, researchers examined how the process enhanced students' literacy learning and determined whether students gained confidence as readers and writers. During follow-up meetings, insights and perspectives were shared to determine recurring and common themes. This process using multiple data sources between four researchers supported the triangulation of the data and helped reduce individual bias.

Reading and Writing Picture Books in the Secondary Classroom

In the following section we share the learning from secondary students engaging with picture books in the context of their literacy classroom. We narrate our learnings in step with the teacher's pedagogical moves that first re-introduced secondary students to picture books, which are typically viewed as resources in elementary classrooms. This helped transform the secondary classroom to allow all students' voices to be heard in safe spaces, as picture books are easily accessible for all learners. We share how the teacher encouraged students to draft, revise, and edit original stories from their unique experiences, how they were prompted to illustrate their picture books, and finally how secondary students shared their achievements with younger learners.

Character Development

As students read a variety of picture books, Jo Anne noticed how these books inspired students to become engrossed in deep whole-class and small-group discussions about gender, identity, culture, place, race, community, etc. Jane said, "These books are short, but they are powerful. Lots of interesting topics." Students found ways to embed their cultural values through visual and written expression (Jones et al., 2022). "You can celebrate and explore your culture in picture books through basic words and images for the reader to understand," explained Cali, another student. Beyond these rich conversations, Jo Anne

also noticed how the picture books became, for her, resources to teach literary elements (e.g., theme, imagery, symbolism, conflict), topics usually taught in secondary school classrooms using more complex novels. Students found themes of diversity and inclusion among characters in current picture books as they wanted their books to reflect the importance of diversity and inclusion in their own lives and the world around them. Jesse shared, "We learn a lot in class about the importance of characters in writing for any reader at any stage or age." Thus, students began to think about characters and topics of interest to them and their readers, including identity, culture, mental health, humor, hobbies, friendships, and families. They discussed how hearing stories about diverse characters struggling with very personal concerns such as acceptance, love, identity, family, and culture allowed readers to connect with and relate to the writing and drawings. For example, in Figures 2 and 3, a student celebrates their cultural recognition and identities. In the past, both adults and children have been often reluctant to share their Indigenous roots. These images depict the deep connection to heritage. In addition, what educators view as sometimes complex literary elements appear simplified through picture books.

Fig. 2: Culture and identity

Fig. 3: Culture and identity

Many students developed their characters in relation to their own lives and identities; others opted for anonymity, creating fictional characters from out of this world—talking animals, ordinary people disguised as superheroes. Most of these students had developed their characters through the use of illustrations (e.g., drawings, computer-generated images, photographs) before exploring plot in detail, an indication of their desire to explore multimodal forms of expression.

Students realized that they could not have too many characters because picture books are usually short, recognizing as well that it would be difficult to fully develop an excess of characters, and likely cause reader confusion.

Drafting Ideas

When students are encouraged to share their ways of engaging with and seeing the world, they are exposed to a wider array of ideas that are diverse, inclusive, and equitable (Spector & Murray, 2023). Writing picture books allows students to express themselves in multiple creative ways. They are able to take on new identities they find challenging and entertaining. For example, James explained, "I was a

duck in my story, not a human." Once students had developed character sketches for their picture book, they began drafting ideas for the story. Students discussed the importance of conflict within plot development. Jane described that her "conflict was figuring out where was the best place to go when I am stressed out and just need a calm place." Jo Anne's previous lessons in narrative writing underscored the necessity of conflict in its many forms to build and sustain reader interest. During the pre-writing stage, students recorded and organized initial ideas in class using strategies they chose themselves, including discussing, listing, freewriting, and pre-drafting. In this pre-writing stage, when creativity often explodes, students preserved ideas in draft form using the strategy that best suited their needs and writing style. Students used graphic organizers such as concept webs to capture the basic structure of plot and character. Using this foundational structure, students began writing the first draft. Jo Anne noticed that for some students, this stage flowed freely, and the feel of the story was smooth with no big changes coming afterwards. For others, the initial story draft would evolve with Jo Anne facilitating word changes, story edits, and grammatical conventions. Students decided on the essential elements they wanted to incorporate and develop in their storytelling including themes, settings, conflicts, and resolutions. Some students were certain that they wanted to include humor in their stories; others were focused on issues such as rhyming, dialogue, and word choice.

Revising and Editing Writing

It is important for students to be participants in the authoring cycle and to see themselves as authors (Lewison et al., 2014; Short et al., 1996). In the revising and editing stages, students revisited many areas of their writing to optimize interest in their story. They achieved this by analyzing writing conventions such as vocabulary choices, sentence structures, plot details, and conflict resolutions. Jo Anne remarked that at this stage, students began identifying as writers. Sarah claimed that her "story didn't have to have a lot of words or follow a particular structure" and Corey explained, "I loved that I could be creative and have more words than pictures or more pictures than words." Through previous discussion and analysis of picture books, students realized there were no restrictions on word count. They could create simple sentences or longer, more complex paragraphs with various sentence styles. Jo Anne observed that students knew their words did not have to rhyme, although some students chose rhyming because they felt it would be more entertaining for readers, and they appeared to enjoy the structure and challenge that rhyming afforded (see Figure 4). Sometimes students shared their wording and sentences with peers for feedback and suggestions, including vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. This peer editing process accentuated the academic and emotional learning within the story (Lewison et al., 2014). The goal was always to make their story flow as smoothly as possible before they reached the publishing stage. Students were reminded that after the final publishing stage, they would read their stories in public—in this case to elementary students at the school—and receive a different level of feedback.

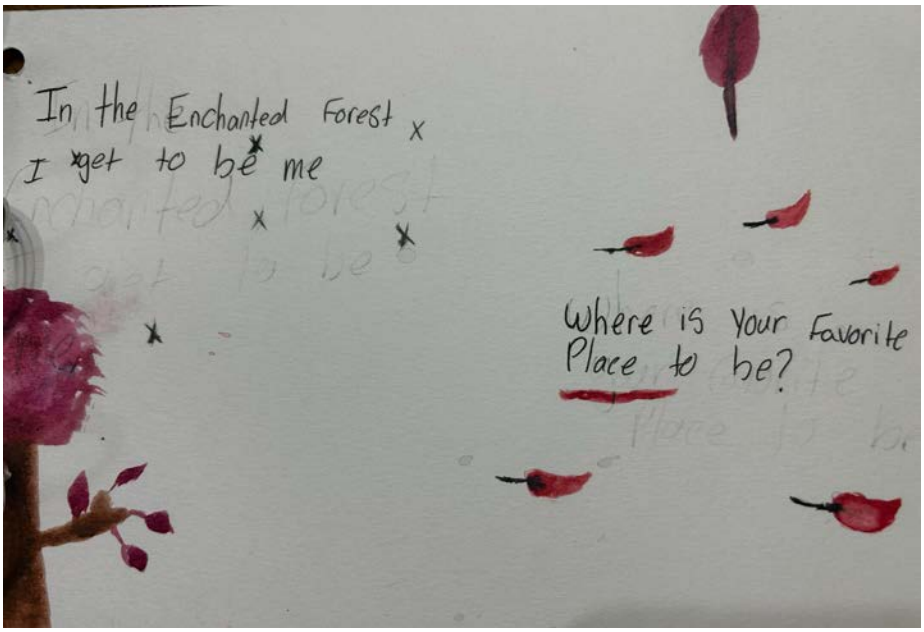

Fig. 4: Example of rhyme

Illustrating Stories

The process of creating original picture books provided opportunities to disrupt students' regular literacy classroom experiences and focus on literacy as a vehicle for personal growth and well-being (Spector et al., 2024). Jones and Woglom (2013) demonstrated the value of using pictures and illustrations as alternative means of communication where even research studies can be documented through illustrations in graphic novels. Students, in addition to writing their stories, enjoyed creating and fine-tuning the details of their illustrations because they knew that illustrations were critical to supporting the unfolding of their story. Students decided through class discussions that they wanted illustrations on every page or at least every second page because they noticed this pattern in most picture books they had read. Jo Anne and peers in the class assured and re-assured each student that by exploring different styles they would discover an illustration style that worked best for their ability and their storyline. Many students first wrote their story and then created the illustrations; others spent more time drawing their pictures than writing their story, choosing to draw and write one page at a time.

Most students chose to draw and color their images on paper (see Figure 5) while some students chose to draw and color their images digitally (see Figure 6 and Figure 7). Digital media offers transformational implications for pedagogical practices in classrooms (Hobbs & Coiro, 2018) and offers multimodal expression (Leland et al., 2022). Experienced artists chose to incorporate more complex images in their picture books, adding background and supporting details. Other students, challenged with their drawing abilities, chose less detailed but no less effective illustrations for their pages. Students expressed to Jo Anne that being a great illustrator was not a necessity; it was more about achieving balance and pairing between the words and illustrations. Many students chose simple and colorful images they felt were their best illustrations, images that would complement and accentuate their stories most effectively.

James explained that "even simple pictures can have powerful meaning." As in the writing, the illustrations represented their personal choices, reflecting what they believed was most important.

Fig. 5: Hand-drawn illustration

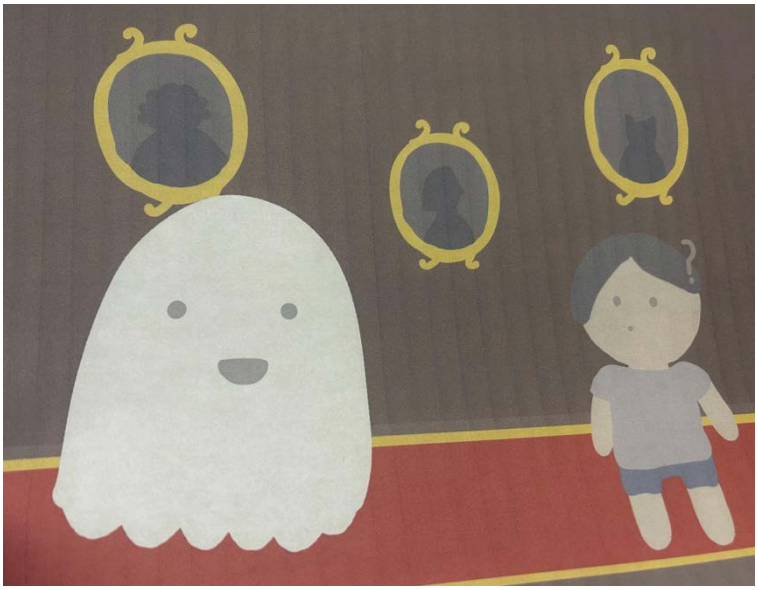

Fig. 6: Digitally created image

Fig. 7: Digitally created image

Sharing Stories Beyond Their Classroom

Reading to others, in this case elementary students, was a celebratory stage for the secondary students. For them, sharing their original picture book also meant sharing a part of their imagination and, without this experience, the writing would have felt incomplete. Akhmetova et al. (2022) claim that attitudes towards reading "can change due to environmental influence, conditions, interests and peers' motivation" (p. 2). Jo Anne's willingness to embrace a project where students shared stories beyond the classroom had a positive influence on secondary students' attitudes toward reading and writing. Students first presented to their classmates as practice before reading to the elementary students, which Jo Anne noted was a great boost to their confidence as actual writers and illustrators. Following Jo Anne's creative writing process with wonderings, jot notes, first drafts, edits, and final drafts, students knew they would be sharing their stories with an elementary class. They expressed interest and enthusiasm about this sharing, and this remained consistent throughout the writing process, especially on the day of the class visit. As Jane said, "I would recommend creating picture books to other grades as I loved both writing and illustrating."

Upon entering the elementary classroom of young eager learners, Jo Anne introduced herself and explained what the secondary students had been doing. The elementary students were visibly enthusiastic and excited to hear the stories.

Each of the secondary school students introduced themselves by name and by story title. In a voluntary order, each student read their story out loud, at the same time showing each page to the class to showcase their illustrations, as the younger students were eager to see their drawings. The secondary students read with confidence and projected their sometimes animated voices to ensure the elementary students could easily hear them. The young students were attentive and appeared genuinely interested. Some of the secondary school students showed how they illustrated their stories, explaining that even if you do not consider yourself to be a great artist, you can still draw great characters by choosing simple strategies. John said, "I chose animals because they were easier to draw than people." Sarah demonstrated to the younger students how she drew the character of a turtle in her story (see Figure 8). Jason explained the details of how he drew a rabbit (see Figure 9). This was engaging for both groups of students as it provided opportunities to build relationships and feel a sense of interconnectedness among them.

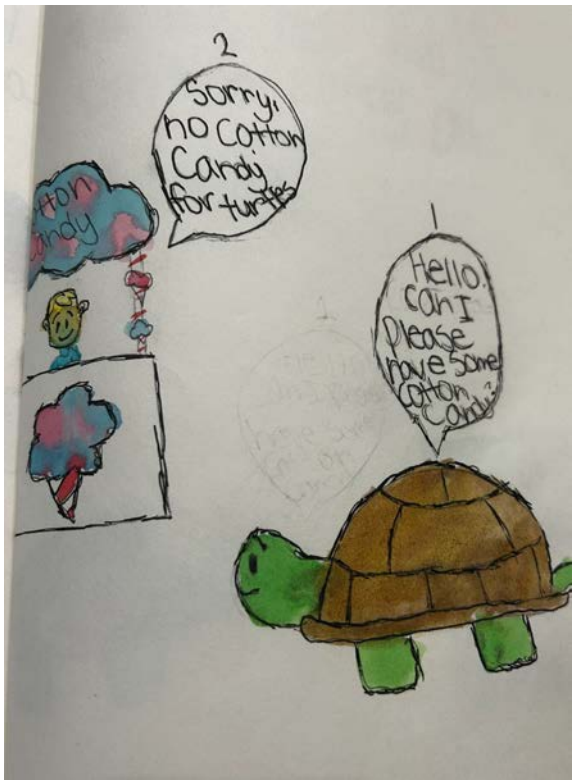

Fig. 8: Turtle character

Fig. 9: Rabbit character

The secondary school students indicated that they felt confident and comfortable reading their picture books to small and large groups for several reasons. Jane explained that she enjoyed writing picture books because "you don't need a lot of words on a page." Jason claimed that he "liked reading to young children because the younger ones don't judge us." The audience provided a safe space for the secondary students' read alouds. The secondary students recognized as well that they were reading role models for the younger students. Additionally, the secondary school students encouraged the elementary students to ask questions and provide verbal feedback on any of the stories. Most of the feedback was about the characters and some aspects of the plot. One critical aspect of this learning experience was that secondary students saw themselves as writers and illustrators (Lewison et al., 2014; Short et al., 1996) as well as readers and role models for the elementary students.

Student Reflections

To follow up with the experiences of reading, composing picture books, and sharing their own stories, Jo Anne asked her students three reflective questions:

1. Did you enjoy reading picture books on your own, with your friends, and with your teacher? Why or why not?
2. What was the best part of reading/making picture books?
3. What did you learn from the experience of reading picture books on your own, with your friends and with your teacher?

Secondary school students overwhelmingly reported that they enjoyed the process of telling their own stories and creating their own books. As Julia explained, "Anyone can write a book if they really want to and I also learned that picture books don't really have an age." Julia's insight confirmed that students did see themselves as authors. James said that you "get a lot of meaning from the pictures" and it can help you "understand it [the story] more." James continued by saying that illustrations do not "have to have simple meaning, they can hold power." Cali confirmed our claim that picture books can be used to teach rich literary elements when she stated, "From picture books I learned that just because it may be a children's book doesn't mean it doesn't have a strong theme." Jesse said that they "enjoyed reading picture books alone and with others because it is a fun experience. You get to share the joy of a picture book together."

Jayna described the "best part of making my picture book was creating the illustrations" and when "reading it [the picture book] was probably seeing the children's faces. I knew I was making an impact." Jayna's comment clearly describes the empowering experience for secondary school students of writing, illustrating, and sharing their books with younger students. Corey also confirmed the joy of making books when stating, "You can learn while having fun. Making picture books started with great conversations." Corey continued, "When we read our books to the younger children, I loved seeing their reaction and seeing how they loved our books." This comment reiterated, for the secondary students, the positive impact of reading their self-created picture books to younger students.

In a debriefing session with Jo Anne, students described picture books as journeys through words and illustrations that lure readers by connecting them with memories of their past experiences of reading picture books, even reminding them of events that may have happened in their own lives. The secondary students' stories told simply and powerfully drew smiles, laughter, and even tears from listeners of all ages. Generally, most people enjoy a great story that can evoke emotional responses while also being easy to comprehend. Picture books can not only do that, but they can do it differently and sometimes more efficiently and effectively than other styles of writing or art. Creating these picture books with secondary school students was a joyful and valuable learning process that Jo Anne will happily continue into future school years.

Discussion: Picture Books and Transformative Spaces

We concur with Luke and Woods (2009): integrating students' lived experiences within educational settings is crucial for teaching and learning. Luke (2012) described one aspect of critical literacy and social justice as a pragmatic curricular approach that intertwines "social, political, and cultural debate and discussion with the analysis of how texts and discourses work where, with what consequences, and in whose interests" (p. 5). Transformative practices extend beyond written texts and into multiple forms of representation. Leland et al. (2022) talk about multimodality as an important means to expand meaning, as well as deepen creativity and imagination beyond expectations. Looking at "texts and illustrations in all books lend themselves to further study" (Leland et al., 2022, p. 135) and promotes critical literacy in socially just spaces.

As Kelly et al. (2020) indicate, all children need access to "books that reflect their identities and expand their perspectives" (p. 297). From our collective experiences in schools, we have found that educators use picture books predominantly in elementary school classrooms; we recognized the need for the use of picture books with secondary students. Reiker (2011) indicated that secondary school teachers who incorporate picture books into their teaching claimed success.

While we agree with Gómez & Saal's (2022) comment that "as literacy leaders, we know that printed words carry great meaning and power" (p. 339), we also recognize the power of illustrations and multiple forms of representations, especially for reluctant and emerging readers. As students engaged more frequently with picture books, Jo Anne remarked that they became more aware of the illustrations, more aware of the messages they carried, and more aware of the stories they told. They also recognized the parallel relationship between the words and the illustrations. Leland et al. (2022) discuss how the arts, in multimodal forms (painting, drawing, drama, dance, music), can be used to support students' access to literacy and how they might extend and deepen learning. We discovered that students were eager to create using multimodal representations in their illustrations. For example, their artistic practices included drawing, painting, digital representations, and photographs.

Students also agreed that characters added great dimension and diversity to their stories through dialogue, plot, appearance, and entertainment. Picture books provide opportunities for readers to develop empathy and social conscience (Callow, 2017) by putting themselves in the characters' shoes. The variety of characters created by the students included ducks, rabbits, turtles, dogs, ghosts, and humans. Tomé-Fernández et al. (2019) claimed that "bringing intercultural experiences and their underlying values to globalized classes through the use of picture books can be a powerful contribution to intercultural education" (p. 205). Such cultural and intercultural connections were evident in the stories that Jo Anne's students chose to share. Interconnections included understanding differences between and within cultures, as well as how all cultures should be equally valued. The stories students read in class along with their personal experiences influenced the stories they chose to write. This aligned with Przymus et al.'s (2022) claim that "stories help us understand our lives" (p. 299) and it was critical for the teaching team to recognize the value of choice, inclusion, equity, and autonomy in reading and writing.

One of the greatest learnings that occurred throughout this study was how fluidly critical literacy can be woven into the everyday fabric of the classroom. Leland et al. (2022) describe that teachers not only need to know the correct books to put into students' hands but must also "put in place the social practice needed to unpack any text that ends up in their hands" (p.13). The discussions that Jo Anne had with her students, as described in this paper, enhanced their ability to view the world in a more socially just manner. Empowering young people is a main goal of education, and picture books offer fresh perspectives to help create critically compassionate citizens, who can help transform spaces inside and outside of the school. The action phase of this project, where students created their own books, allowed time for them to reflect thoughtfully on issues of importance to them and on common societal concerns. Through book composing and critically viewing their world, they learned to reposition themselves and figure out "how to talk and walk differently in the world" (Leland et al., 2022, p.13). Is that not the ultimate goal of transformation within socially just spaces?

Concluding Thoughts

When Jo Anne started the picture book project in class, students recalled through discussion many great memories and connections they had with picture books from their younger years. There were many conversations about the power of picture books to create memorable and emotional experiences for the readers. For them, the best memories were the positive emotions evoked when thinking about reading together with family. Many students talked about having some of their favorite picture books at home as keepsakes. Other students spoke confidently about the need for picture books to be more diverse and inclusive to represent our society more accurately.

This project, while a small step in a longer journey to promote transformation and interconnectedness through literacy, pointed to the value of using picture books in secondary school classrooms. The student feedback from Jo Anne's class demonstrated the benefits of teachers and secondary students actively engaged in reading picture books together and creating their own original books. Our project showed that writing and illustrating picture books was a valuable learning experience and aligns with Clarke and Broders' (2022) study that shows the possibility and positivity of using picture books with all students at all levels of development. It demonstrated that reading those books to younger children was a necessary stage in the writing process that allowed secondary students to share their inspiration and imagination for creating picture books as well as strengthen relationships among learners. Student feedback emphasized that emotions can be powerfully revealed through a few words and compelling illustrations. Student voices confirmed that picture books belong in elementary and secondary classrooms to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity within transformative spaces—spaces where all students feel seen and heard.

List of Picture Books for Secondary Students

Alznauer, A. (2020). *The boy who dreamed of infinity: A tale of the genius Ramanujan*. Candlewick.

Anderson, H. C. (2001) *The little match girl*. Puffin Books.

Beaty, A. (2019). *Sofia Valdez, future prez*. Abrams.

Beaty, A. (2016). *Ada Twist, scientist*. Abrams.

Browne, A. (2003). *Voices in the park*. DK Publishing.

Byers, G., & Bobo, K. A. (2019). *I am enough*. Library Ideas, LLC.

Carrey, J. (2013). *How Roland rolls*. Some Kind of Garden Media.

Cronin, D. (2000). *Click, clack, moo: Cows that type*. Simon & Schuster.

Flom, J. (2018). *Lulu is a rhinoceros*. Scholastic.

Fritsch, K., & McGuire, A. (2021). *We move together*. AK Press.

Gilman, P. (2004). *Jillian Jiggs*. Scholastic Canada.

Grant, S. (2023). *Up home*. Nimbus Publishing.

Gravett, E. (2007). *Meerkat mail*. Simon and Schuster.

Innocenti, R., & Frisch, A. (2012). *The girl in red*. Creative Editions.

Jenkins, S. (1997). *What do you do when something wants to eat you?* Houghton Mifflin.

Jenkins, S. (2011). *Actual size*. Houghton Mifflin.

Kilodavis, C. (2009). *My princess boy*. CNIB.

Lerch. (2010). *Swim! Swim!* Scholastic.

Maclear, K. (2022). *Kumo: The bashful cloud*. Tundra Books.

Muhammad, I. (2019). *The proudest blue: A story of hijab and family*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

National Geographis Kids. (2014). *National geographic kids just joking 5: 300 hilarious jokes about everything, including tongue twisters, riddles, and more!* Penguin Random House Canada.

Nyong'o, L. (2019). *Sulwe*. Simon & Schuster books for young readers.

Penfold, A. (2019). *All are welcome*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Percival, T. (2017). *Perfectly Norman*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Reid, M. (2021). *Maryam's magic: The story of mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani*. HarperCollins.

Reynolds, P. H., Gregory, C. H., & Bramfitt, D. (2004). *Ish*. Walker books.

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Carolyn Clarke is an assistant professor of education at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Her previous experiences include working as a primary and elementary teacher, district leader in literacy and elementary education, vice-principal, principal and senior education officer (Family of Schools). She earned a BEd from Memorial University of Newfoundland, an MEd and an MAEd from Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and a PhD in Literacy Education at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. Carolyn's research interests include homework, the work of female caregivers in supporting their children's education, critical literacy, social justice, using children's literature to teach in high school classes, and students' voice in schools.

Evan Throop Robinson earned his PhD in 2016 from the University of South Australia. He is a former elementary teacher, instructional leader, and instructor for teacher education with experience in schools and universities in British Columbia, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. As a curriculum consultant he supports teacher training and curriculum revisioning in mathematics education outreach activities across the Caribbean. Evan continues to work in classrooms through research activities with children and support for preservice teachers. He collaborates on the Moving Achievement Together Holistically (MATH) project to provide culturally relevant and sustaining learning experiences for children from historically excluded communities.

Ellen Carter earned her PhD from St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, and is currently an assistant professor at that university. She previously taught for nearly a decade in Nova Scotia public schools, primarily in upper elementary, middle school, and secondary mathematics. Ellen is greatly interested in mathematics education, particularly in the areas of trauma-informed practices and decolonization. She is committed to advocacy and support for the education of children and youth in care. Outside of her role in the Faculty of Education, Ellen serves as a foster parent trainer with the Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia.

Jo Anne Broders completed her MEd from Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, with a literacy focus. Currently, she is a secondary English Language Arts and Social Studies teacher at Smallwood Academy in Gambo, Newfoundland, and has 29 years' teaching experience. She worked as an assistant principal and as an ELA program specialist for Grades 7, 8, and 9 with the Department of Education in Newfoundland and Labrador. Jo Anne received the 2023 Premier's Award in Newfoundland and Labrador for Teaching and the 2024 Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching. She continues to focus on civic engagement, critical literacy, and social justice within her teaching and learning.